His moves watched

Komer: Key Civilian in 'Pacification'

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SAIGON, May 14—For the next 60 days the most watched man in Saigon will be a tweedy, nervous, energetic, bright former White House official named Robert W. Komer. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker named Komer deputy to Gen. William C. Westmoreland as part of a massive reorganization of the American advisory effort in pacification.

Westmoreland is now in charge of pacification, and Komer his executive assistant. "Everything depends on Komer," said a civilian official last Friday. "If he does not make it, it means the end of civilian influence."

"Pacification" is all those programs designed to bring security and the presence of

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the Saigon government to the Vietcong-dominated countryside. Its fashionable synonym is Revolutionary Development, in which trained teams are placed in hamlets for combined civil defense-civic action chores.

Security Essential

These programs, which were run by the civilian mission through the Office of Civil Operations, have been turned over to the military on the grounds that only the military which has the support and logistics facilities capable of making the programs work. That, plus the fact that "security"—a military responsibility—is the one indispensable ingredient in pacfication.

Komer's office will be near Westmoreland's in military headquarters on Congly Street in downtown Saigon. He has been given the personal rank of Ambassador, which in his job is equivalent to a three-star general. Initially, he will work with a small civilian staff of his own, but will have the immense resources of the command at his disposal.

Komer "will not be isolated in an air-conditioned room" said an official familiar with the new arrangements, but will make field trips himself to see the progress, or lack of it, of security in the countryside. Already he has thoughts of making use of military intelligence facilities to learn more about the Vietcong structure.

It is understood that Komer will have authority ot assign officers to the program, and to recommend removal of officers found lacking. He will operate as civilian equal in the bowels of a very rigid military staff system.

More important, Komer will be involved in the top-secret planning of military operations and thus be able to assert the civilian (or "political") interest, an interest sometimes neglected by the war planners.

Official Surprised

Last year, for example, the III Corps region chief John Paul Vann did not learn of Operation Cedar Falls until virtually the last minute. Cedar Falls was run through a populated area in Tayninh Province, and ultimately produced thousands of refugees and some unfortunate political fallout.

Both military and civilian sources are quick to point out that not all the bureaucratic arrangements have been worked out, by which they mean Komer will have to maneuver to keep his brief as wide as possible. Under the terms the Ambassador appears to have set, Komer has the authority to inquire into virtually every facet of military operations as they affect Revolutionary Development.

Komer is widely keeping his own council, but it is believed his priorities will be the Chieu Hoi program (The "Open Arms" campaign to encourage Vietcong defections), opening roads and thus boosting the economy in the countryside, and improving security for the Revolutionary Development cadre teams — who are increasingly being mauled by the Vietcong.

No one knows where the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) stands in his line-up of priorities, but it is the ARVN which is supposed to provide the security. Komer is known to believe that it is only the American military who have influence with ARVN commanders.

Different Outlook

But the basic issue, and the one which is fascinating observers here, is the difference in conception of the war in Vietnam. Briefly put, the military believes the war to be basically one of aggression from the North and the civilians view it as basically a civil war.

From those conceptions, the military tends to use as its indices of change battalion-sized operations and body counts, while the civilians look at the intangibles: Whether or not the guerrilla force is fading, whether or not the Saigon government level, and the attitudes of the Vietnamese peasant.

This becomes crucial when Komer begins to read the reports from the field, reports which will now come through military channels and over the signature of the top American military commander in the four Corps areas.

The matter of overoptimistic reports has been an ancient plague in Vietnam, largely laid at the door of military men anxious not to jeopardize their careers by seeming "negative." In a war difficult to perceive at best, it becomes a simple matter to report encouraging news and underplay the difficulties.

Komer an Optimist

There are men in the field here who believe that this is precisely what is going to happen under the new arrangements, particularly since there is no reluctance in Washing-

ton to believe good news. One top-level civilian official is already reported to have resigned.

Komer has been described as a congenital optimist, although one willing to listen to all points of view. In his first four days in Saigon, he has made two field trips and dined at least twice with the hardest-nosed, most critical

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civilian officials in South Vietnam.

What it boils down to, according to one analysis in Saigon, is whether or not Komer can dominate the military staff system and learn for himself the state of the countryside. Having learned that, can he then force changes in the pacification program, some of which surely will run directly counter to military traditions?

This will depend as much on personality as upon wit, or paper authority. Can an enthusiastic, pipe-smoking, Harvard-educated, volatile ex-CIA man from the White House impose his will on the tough colonels from the school of hard knocks?

Komer is close to Ellsworth Bunker, and has had access to the President. But can he operate as Westmoreland's left hand? One observer here has noted that once he steps through the door at U.S. military headquarters he is on his own, the pigeon among the cats.

"I will tell you what will happen," said an American official who has watched the game from both sides of the street. "They are going to give him that office, and a great fat bundle of reports. Then they are going to give him studies, and suggestions for projects. Hundreds and hundreds of projects. He will start to work on the projects with that tiny staff, and one day two months from now he is going to wake up and find that all the work is going on right around his office. They will have boxed him in. They will have neutralized him."